



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

FEBRUARY 3, 2019
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

What Will You Do for Love? Luke 4:21-30; I Corinthians 13:1-13

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Valentine's Day is in jeopardy this year! There will be no Sweethearts® candy! That means there will be none of those sweet, chalky little hearts with endearing messages stamped on them in red food coloring. The New England Confectionary Company (better known as Necco) closed last year and the new owners of the brand were not able to produce the sweet treats proclaiming "Be Mine," "Miss You," "Call Me," and "I ♥ You." For over a hundred years, these iconic candy hearts have been used to leave messages, offer a proposal of marriage, decorate Valentine crafts, and even teach reading! This year, I guess we will all have to tell each other how we feel with spoken words! Imagine that!

Valentine's Day is a special day to celebrate and profess love for the people closest to us. As we all know, however, every day is a day to do love. What will you do for love?

You may have experienced a little *deja vu* earlier in the service when the Gospel lesson was read. If you asked yourself if we read the same passage last week, the answer is "nearly yes." We read the first part of that story about Jesus going to his home synagogue and reading from the scroll of Isaiah and declaring good news. I told the rest of the story (which we heard this morning) about the congregation hustling Jesus to the edge of a cliff before he turned and walked away.

I think the story is worth repeating because it happened for a reason and it was written and repeated for a reason. There was a reason Jesus went to the synagogue that day. There was a reason that he read what he did and said what he did. There was a reason he turned and walked through the crowd without a cross word, accusation, or recrimination. The reason behind all of these actions is that Jesus was in Nazareth, the reason Jesus was on earth, was to love.

I heard the other day that poet Kwame Alexander is inviting teachers and parents to encourage their children to write a poem and submit it to NPR's Morning Edition to possibly be read on Valentine's Day. The prompt

is simple. Write a line or an entire poem using the phrase, “Love is”¹
We could all do that, couldn’t we? Love is . . . What? Charles Schultz once said, “All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn’t hurt.” So get some chocolate, and then think about how you would complete the line, “Love is” Maybe you can submit a poem yourself.

A couple of thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul tried his hand at a “Love is . . .” poem, and he did a pretty good job. Sometimes known as “The Hymn to Love,” it is imbedded in Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. You know this poem, but hear it again:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient;
love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in the wrong,
but rejoices in the right.
It bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;
as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will come to an end.
For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;
but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

¹Rachel Martin, host, “What Is Love? Teachers, Share This Prompt With Your Students,” *NPR Morning Edition* (January 28, 2019).

When I was a child,
I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child,
I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult,
I put an end to childish ways.
For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part;
then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.
And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love. I Corinthians 13:1-13

I would say that Paul, or whoever wrote this beautiful and profound poem, did a pretty good job of saying what love is. Notice that his understanding of love is neither sentimental nor superficial. In essence, he tells us that love is foundational to all of life and that without it, nothing else really matters. He explains that love is self-giving and flexible, sacrificial and generous. Love is not, however, a doormat on which we may simply wipe our dirty feet and walk on. No. Love insists on whatever is right and just. It is tough and deliberate, steady and unwavering. In short, love is the most important thing. In fact, in that last line of the poem, which we often quote and, I daresay, all know by heart, Paul makes a stunning declaration: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Did you hear that? The greatest of these is love! Love is greater than faith and hope? I thought faith was supposed to be the supreme characteristic of our lives and hope is supposed to keep us going no matter what! Yet, Paul places love above all else. This exuberant, lavish, tough-as-nails, justice seeking, self-sacrificing, joyous gift of love is the most important thing of all in life. Wow!

You see, Paul knew Jesus. No doubt when he was a young scribe hanging out with the priests and teachers in Jerusalem, Saul, as he was known then, saw and heard Jesus. It is possible that he saw him caring for people who were ill. He probably heard him teach in the temple. He may have been around when Jesus was arrested and questioned by the high priest. He may have witnessed the crucifixion. He obviously heard about the resurrection and he was present at the stoning of Stephen whose love for

Jesus resulted in his death. On the road to Damascus, on his way to persecute any followers of Christ that he could find, Saul met Jesus. The experience caused him to temporarily lose his sight, but the eyes of his heart were opened. After a period of reflection, introspection, and transformation, Paul, as he came to be known, traveled throughout the known world to share the love of Christ. Paul knew love because he had discovered it in Jesus and he had experienced it through Jesus' own mercy offered to him.

Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth on the sabbath because that was his custom. It was what he did every sabbath growing up and after he became an adult. The people there were his people—family and friends whom he knew well and who knew him well. He loved them and he wanted them to be among the first to hear the gospel proclaimed. He wanted them to get the good news first.

When their anger and misunderstanding prevented them from hearing what he said, they turned on him. Jesus didn't fight back. As a carpenter, I imagine he was a rather strong man and could have easily tossed a few folks over the cliff before the mass of the crowd sent him plummeting below. Because he loved them, because his love was stronger than his fear or his anger, he walked away, knowing they would hear the good news again.

Several years later, when another mob arrested him on false information, he did not resist. Unable to walk away from the Roman soldiers, Jesus let his love speak for him. He sought forgiveness for the ones who were causing his death. He made certain his mother was cared for. Understanding the mindset of the people, he allowed himself to die in the most horrible way possible so that they would make the connection between the sacrifices they made at the temple and the self-sacrifice God was making for their sakes.

Three days later, by a power we do not understand, love resurrected Jesus. He could have chosen to return to heaven where the unity of God would be established once again. He could have written off all of the people who were unwilling or unable to trust the love that he had shown them on earth. He could have declared the experiment of creation a failure and wiped the slate clean to try again another day. But he did not. The love of God, which is a model for our own, is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God's love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right. God's love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures

all things—even betrayal, abandonment, and death. Because God’s love never ends, neither does our life.

The writer of the Epistle of I John said it this way, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10 NRSV). Or, as Eugene Peterson translated it, “This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they’ve done to our relationship with God (*The Message*).

When Jesus walked this earth and encountered folks pretty much like you and me, it was as if he handed out treats to each of them, little hearts on which was printed, “I love you!” He passed them out on hillsides to feed a hungry crowd. He put them in the hands of lepers and people who were crippled or deaf or blind or unable to speak. He gave them to fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, scribes, and priests. He shared them with mothers, fathers, children, soldiers, and people who were tormented by illnesses of the body, mind, and heart. Regardless of their station in life, of income or pedigree, no matter the color of their skin, the leaning of their politics, or the perspective of their faith, Jesus gave everyone the simplest and most powerful message of all: I love you.

What would you say in a poem about love? What will you do for love? How will you speak love to the world? The greatest thing in life, bar none, is the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ. It is that love—generous, self-sacrificing, justice-seeking, tough and unwavering—that God in Christ offers to us and expects from us. There will never be a shortage of that message in this life or in the life to come. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (I John 4:16). That says it all. Amen.

February 3, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gracious and merciful God, we are gathered in your presence to celebrate and remember the greatest of all gifts, the love you have poured out abundantly through the coming of Christ among us. When he took on human form, he was scorned and mocked, yet he loved and accepted all he encountered and extended mercy even to those who despised him. When he walked among us, many rejected him from their tables, yet he invites all to feast at his table. When he taught us of life in God's kingdom and challenged us to respond to others with God's abundant, inclusive love, he was accused and put to death, yet offers pardon and abundant life to all who will receive him.

As we prepare to gather at the feast that is set before us, we confess to you, Righteous God, that we have not extended the same compassion and hospitality that has been granted to us. We have feared or refused the stranger because we have believed our resources too meager. We have stereotyped the other as suspicious or dangerous or inferior because we did not make the effort to understand. We have been too busy trying to impress our important guests, thereby serving our own needs, instead of demonstrating welcome to the ones who could not repay our kindness. We have overlooked the beauty in those who speak a different language or wear different clothing or hold different beliefs or opinions and have often failed to recognize your image in them. We have clutched tightly to the gifts you have given to us, believing that we have earned or deserved them, rather than sharing freely and joyfully out of the extravagant generosity with which you have filled our lives. For these and all the times we have rejected those we have been called to love and to serve, thereby rejecting you, have mercy on us, O God.

Make us worthy, we pray, to sit at Christ's table as his friends. In this meal we will share, let our weary hearts be revived and our hungry souls be fed, that nurtured in your hospitality, we may feed others with physical nourishment, with the sustenance of dignity and justice, with the wine of compassion, and with the bread of true friendship. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, may Christ live in us and we in him so that we may welcome, love, and serve all our brothers and sisters in the human family, and in so doing, receive you. Amen.

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